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ABSTRACT

A study examined the role of talk in the writing act. The study utilized participant observational techniques in an attempt to discover how talk was implicated in all stages of writing. Subjects were three fourth, fifth, and/or sixth grade informants, with one student emerging as the key informant in the study. Results indicated that talk appeared to be a crucial aspect of writing, beginning with planning and moving to conferencing, collaborating, and revising. In all cases, talk was viewed as an internal process of reflective dialogue and an external act in which the writer actively engaged in dialogue with peers in an attempt to clarify textual meaning. Part of talking the loneliness out of writing is recognizing that all composing strategies are, in relevant ways, socially based. In other words, writing depends on talk as a means for planning all the way through to revising. Just as speaking tries to convey the speaker's intentions to others, thereby overcoming the isolation of egocentric talk, so it is in writing that talk is used as a vehicle for clarifying the writer's intentions to others. When there is success in both endeavors there is a fundamental sense in which completion is achieved. (Fourteen references are attached.) (RAE)

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TALKING THE LONELINESS OUT OF WRITING

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of talk in the writing act. This study (which grew out of a larger study which looked at writing to learn in response to text) utilized participant observational techniques in an attempt to discover how talk was implicated in all stages of writing. Three informants served as subjects with one student (David) emerging as the key informant in the study. Talk appeared to be a crucial aspect of writing, beginning with planning and moving to conferencing, collaborating, and revising. In all cases, talk was viewed as an internal process of reflective dialogue and an external act in which the writer actively engaged in dialogue with peers in an attempt to clarify textual meaning. Talking the loneliness out of writing could, therefore, be conceptualized as an essential aspect of "learning from the writing what it intends to say" (Murray, in Donovan & McClelland, 1980).

Talking the Loneliness Out of Writing

Introduction

One of the more obvious (and traditional) ways we distinguish writing and reading from speaking and listening is along social lines (Brandt, in Pederson, 1986). That is to say, what seems to be conventional wisdom is that we speak and listen together and, in the main, we write and read alone. Writing and reading, it would appear, are generally seen as private, solitary episodes with language. As Brandt puts it,

> On an individual level, both learning to write and learning to read are sometimes described as learning to withdraw from the supportive cues and collaborative effort of conversational meaning-making and instead to sustain what Berry Kroll has called "the autonomous production of texts" to be weaned away from interpretive dependence on situational context and to learn to make meaning solely out of the semantic resources and logical relationships of written language (Ibid, p. 115).

In sharp contrast to this view, however, is the view that meaning-making in composition closely parallels the meaning-making that takes place in oral interactions. Myers (in Squire, 1987) argues very strongly for a fundamental oral/written similarity in underlying forms. He quotes Tannen's (1982) argument that "features that have been associated exclusively with spoken or written language are often found in discourse in the other mode." Cooper (1982) is also used by Myers to support the view that the "fundamental communicative process" is the same in both oral and written language.

Myers' argument for the similarities in underlying processes is to be found in a sociological view of language. Hymes (1975), for example, distinguishes between a speech act (such as asking someone to close the door), the speech event (such as a conversation or lecture), and the speech situation (such as eating, political gatherings, and weddings). Speech acts are rule-governed and are embedded in speech events. Speech events, on the other hand, are, in Hyme's view, the maximum set of speech activities "directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech." Speech situations, "in contrast to speech events...are not themselves governed by...one set of rules throughout (Quoted in Myers, 1987, p. 127).

What Myers proposes is that texts be analyzed as speech events in which writing shares with oral language three sets of rhetorical relationships established through the conventions of distancing, processing, and modelling, and in which the differences among conversations, presentations and rituals - whether oral or written - are more important than the differences between oral and written language.

In keeping with this view, Bartholomae (1980) claims that writing, then reading one's text aloud, helps students correct their mistakes. His argument is based on the distinction he makes between a student's reading of someone else's text and a students' oral reconstruction of text:

> Since fluent readers are reading for meaning, they are actively predicting what will come and processing large chunks of graphic information at a time. They do not read individual words, and they miscue because they speak what they expect to see rather than what is actually on the page....
>
> The situation is different when a student reads his own text, since this reader already knows what the

> passage means and attention is drawn, then, to the representation of that meaning. Reading also frees a writer from the constraints of transcription, which for many basic writers is an awkward, laborious process, putting excessive demands on both patience and short-term memory. (1980, p. 267)

For the young writer, then, talk serves an important function in a number of important ways; ways designed to make the writing less of a solitary act and more of a collaborative venture. In the first instance, it would appear that talk to oneself is an important first step in assisting in the process of helping writing to "find its own meaning." As Donald Murray (in Donovan and McClelland, 1980) states,

> At the beginning of the composing process there is only blank paper. At the end of the composing process there is a piece of writing which has detached itself from the writer and found its own meaning, a meaning the writer probably did not intend.

This process cannot be understood by looking backward from a finished page. However, we can, says Murray, study writing as it evolves in our own minds and on our own pages and as it finds its own meaning through the hands of our writer colleagues and our writing students. There is a danger in such examinations; in the very act of analysis there is the tendency to isolate one part of the process thereby overemphasizing one part of the process at the expense of the other parts. Moreover, situations in classrooms are created where some teachers present each part of the writing process to their students in a prescriptive sequential order, creating (as Murray describes it) a new kind of terrifying rhetoric which "teaches" well but "learns" poorly.

If, however, we stand back to look at the writing process, we can see the writer following through the three stages of rehearsing, drafting, and revising as the piece of work moves toward its own meaning. And although these stages blend and overlap, they are distinct and, what is more important, talk plays a central role in assisting in the process of helping writing to find its own meaning.

To sum up, in this process of discovering meaning - rehearsing, drafting, revising - the writer's meaning is found. To illustrate, I would like to share some comments on the role of talk made by a number of students and teachers who agreed to be interviewed and who were willing to talk freely about how talk-write helped to move the act from a solitary endeavour to a productive and meaningful experience.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of talk in the writing act. Special attention was given to the influence of literature on children's writing with specific attention given to the role that talk played in producing written responses (to stories that had been read or listened to by the students).[1]

The particular qualitative methodology used was an ethnographic field study (Goetz and Le Compte, 1984), with participant observation serving as the principal approach. This technique allowed the researchers to gain close contact with the informants in the study, to describe the informants'

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[1]The data collected and analyzed in this study was gathered in conjunction with a major study undertaken by S. Horobin (in preparation).

perspectives from their point of view, and to interpret the data in light of a close involvement and understanding of the situation.

A brief pilot study was undertaken to familiarize the researcher with the techniques of participant observation and to experiment with a number of methodological approaches to data gathering as a lead in to the major study.

Although the major phase of the study was conducted over a six month period of time (January to June, 1988), I was involved primarily in the latter phase of the study with three of the key informants in the study (David, Bernice and Sherry - not their real names), and specifically with David, who became the key informant in examining the role of talk in writing.

All of the children involved in this study were 9-to-12-year-olds and were in the fourth, fifth, or sixth grades. In all, seven children were interviewed (along with the three teachers who worked with the children in an open area setting). Since my study grew out of the major study, only one student's responses will be discussed in detail. Other students' comments will be reported in light of their reflections and my observations on the role of talk in writing.

The questions which guided this research can be stated as follows:

> What role does talk play in the development and refinement of writing?

Since my concern was primarily related to talk, I shall present each of the strategies which emerged from this study mainly in terms of the role that talk played in the development and refinement of writing.

Talk's Role for Planning in Writing

The term 'planning' was used to cover three explicitly stated strategies: mapping, webbing, and listing answers to questions beginning

with Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How (the 5WIH method). Most teachers strongly favoured this approach. As one teacher stated, "...it discourages them from learning off the top of their heads." However, the children were quite adamant in stating that planning did not help them with their writing. As one student put it, "No one draws a web each time they write. We only use webbing when we are having trouble with our stories." Another student's comments are instructive:

> They (the teachers) are just trying to make us web.
>
> But we really don't like webbing.

What this seems to point to is that planning is much more an internal process where, as Donald Murray says,

> The act of voicing experience and connecting it invites, I think, fundamentally an aural facility. We record in written language what we say in our heads...I was not aware until recently when I studied my own writing process that I listened to my voice while I wrote "silently" with typewriter and by pen (1980, p. 9).

It is evident, then, that in planning for writing, writers must work at listening for that internal voice - "to talk to ourselves within the enormous room of the mind" and then talk to others. Perhaps the first step in overcoming the loneliness of the writer is to enter the community of one and commune with oneself. The text which is then produced is the result of an internal reconstruction of a world created within one's own mind. When this world has been articulated on paper it can then be talked over with others and read by others. This leads naturally to a deeper level of criticism, the reading of the text and responding to it.

The Place of Talk in Conferencing

In addition to assisting students with their writing, conferencing helps students clarify the meaning of their drafts. To illustrate, Teacher dialogue with a student is instructive,

> Tell me what will happen next?
>
> What will be the end result?
>
> What happens to the turtle?

Most of the students seemed adept at conferencing with each other. As another teacher put it,

> ...then pretty soon they get into such a habit of asking one another for more ideas, that we don't even notice it...They'll just go to somebody and they will say, "Can I have a conference with you?" Without coming to us.

Bruffee (1983) in his studies of writing and reading as collaborative or social acts, has discovered that since writing is basically a form of speech, one might view writing as talking to another in a focused and coherent way. He stresses that speech is vitally important to writing and collaborative learning is essential to completing a written task.

Thomas (1975), in his analysis of small group writing conferences, supports Bruffee's contention. Since writing is an act of communication, it makes sense that potential writers should be involved in a substantial and varied amount of communicating. He goes on to encourage writers to take on the roles of speaker and listener, writer and audience. Such an approach will assist in reinforcing the concept of two-directional communication. David's practices support this view. During a discussion with David about writer's block, he was asked what he did when he was 'stumped.' He replied:

> I just sit and think and sometimes I ask people who are sitting by me...like Ian always sits by me at conference and I say 'Ian, what do you think should happen next in my story,' or something like that.

Bernice also used the peer conference in the same way as David. She mentioned that when she ran out of ideas, she liked to take some time to think and reflect, but she also liked to talk with her friends about her story. She had conferred with others about her camp story. In this respect, she seemed to feel more comfortable talking with her peers than with adults. She only talked with her parents about her writing at her teachers' requests, and only with her teachers about her writing when the teachers initiated a conference.

As Bernice noted, the students were encouraged, at times, to conference with their parents. For example, another teacher encouraged those students doing Conference Writing at the computers to

> get a printout every 2 or 3 days. Take a copy home and conference with your parents. You might find it helpful to generate some new ideas with them. You don't necessarily need to work on proof-reading - work on your ideas.

This point was further illustrated in a conversation with David:

> G: It was interesting because when we looked at it (your story) on the weekend, there were some questions that came to my mind and I wondered if you were going to do some explaining a little bit further in the story? For example, one of the things that interested both of us...you know the spaceship on the roof of the house...in the

prologue? I was wondering what happened to the spaceship?

D: (after a long pause) Oh, I never thought of that. (another long pause) Maybe they towed it back with them. Yeah (quite excitedly). Yeah, cause they, they took his friend's spaceship back because his was broken. (another long pause) I never actually thought about that.

Student-teacher conferences were also valued by the librarian, although she expressed this feeling in, perhaps, a different way. She felt that lack of student-teacher conferences in subjects other than Language Arts was of concern, and was perhaps detrimental to the student's development in those areas. This was particularly interesting because she provided a more global view of writing in the entire school.

One of the other concerns I have about the writing process is that sometimes the children are not allowed the same luxury of working through that process in other subject areas. Some pieces of writing in Social Studies, for example, are written during one period, some are never finished, and the children never have the opportunity to go back and to conference and to talk about it...many of those kids need to be conferenced, one on one, to work it through...and if they don't want to change things or add things or whatever, then at least they've had that opportunity to have dialogue with you.

In sum, several kinds of conferences were encouraged in this classroom: conferences with teachers, peers, parents, group conferences,

and individual conferences. What is constitutive of all these conferences is the important role that talk plays in helping children construct, rehearse, make meaning of, and revise text; above all, it provides a forum whereby they are able to receive support and encouragement.

Talk as a Vehicle for Collaborating in Story Creation

In looking at the role of collaboration in writing, what seems evident, is that it is particularly helpful for idea generation (Graves, 1978). However, drafting a text appears to be accomplished more efficiently when produced by a single author. As one student said, "The stories that we write together are not necessarily better; they are just longer." The following comments from Bernice (one of the key informants) is representative of other students' attitudes toward collaborative writing:

> B: Well, at home I like to write alone but here, at school, it's better writing with someone else because like you have to share and I'm kind of scared of sharing. I don't like sharing so if someone comes up here to share with me, then I'm not nervous anymore...And if you think of an idea together, then it's both of your ideas. If somebody takes the idea away, when it is thought of together, it's not very good 'cause it is both of our ideas, so we write together.
>
> G: Do you get distracted a lot do you think?
>
> B: In school, I do. That's what's bad about writing together. Maybe we get too carried away by laughing and everything and we don't write very much. Like with Rachel, we started a week ago and we hardly did anything. Like yesterday, we get lots of ideas but we didn't put them down because...we didn't really write lots.
>
> G: Do you like to write alone usually or do you like to write with someone?
>
> B: Alone.

Collaborative writing thus served a social rather than an academic function. For the majority of students in this setting, collaborative writing was fun, it incurred fewer risks, and it encouraged more ideas. On the other hand, writing independently entailed fewer distractions and

therefore quality ideas, more writing of better quality, a greater degree of ownership, and no compromises. It seemed that collaboration was beneficial in two instances: during conferences with each other and during rehearsal stages of writing. Drafting and revising stages of writing were, on the other hand, more efficient when the children worked independently.

To sum up, collaborative writing invited a form of social discourse wherein participants used talk to cement social relationships. Moreover, the major outcome in writing collaboratively was in the generation of ideas. Writing collaboratively could thus be viewed as an essential and harmonious form of prewriting. On the other hand, to write productively, students felt that they needed to compose alone where the collaborative relationship that surfaces is that which exists between self-talk and the written text being enacted.

Talk and Revision

As this research revealed, revision came increasingly to be seen as a necessary strategy for young writers to utilize in producing text. It was difficult, in fact, to separate revision from conferencing, because it appeared that it was through conferencing and sharing that the need for revision became evident. Teachers and peers could thus make suggestions and ask questions, all of which led to improving the coherence of the text.

In point of fact, few revisions to text were ever made when the student was asked to revise a piece of text. For example, an examination of a number of "rough" and "good" copies of assignments showed little evidence of the revision process; the two copies looked almost identical.

However, although revision strategies were not practiced regularly, it was evident that children understood the need for them. For example, one student stated, "I know whether my writing is good when I reread it." However, she seemed to be ambivalent about her ability to critique her own

work. During another interview, she said that she relied on other people to respond to her writing. But, in a subsequent interview, in responding to a query about what makes a really successful piece of writing, she responded, "If you don't like it, it's because you're very critical of yourself, or if you like it, then it probably means that it is a good story."

David (my key informant) also seemed to be aware of the need for revision and expressed interest and excitement over suggestions for revision; however, he actually made very few revisions during the time that I observed him. For example, I was able, through asking questions about areas in David's story that were confusing, to point out inconsistencies in the flow of the story. He became quite excited about this, and seemed to reach clarity through the conference, but he never, in actual fact, made the revisions that so excited him. It seemed that the story line was in control of his writing and, until his story was completed, little revising would occur. David, in effect, was quite content to just make plans for revisions.

However, it is important to note the structural changes that David had made in the initial development of his text. He described them in this way:

> When I started this story, this was the whole story. I mean that these three computer pages was the whole story. Then I decided that I'd write a sequel to it and this second part was that sequel. Then I changed it so that the first story was the prologue and the sequel then continued the story, so I put it all together.

Revision, then, calls upon the writer to develop a special kind of reading skill (Murray, in Gillespie et. al, 1986). As Murray says, "The writer must learn to read critically but constructively, to cut what is bad, to reveal what is good." Basically, what writers must learn to do is

to "listen to their own voices." In Murray's view, voice is the force which drives a piece of writing forward. A good piece of writing "is always marked by a consistent, individual voice." (Murray, ibid., p. 90).

Writing which is revised is thus writing which is subjected to a "new vision." This may help to explain why some writing should not be revised in haste. David's story, for example, could (and should) not be revised until the initial vision of the text has been set down.

Conclusion

To view writing as "an event that occurs within a public context, a context of 'we' can bring a new and much-needed perspective to composition by reuniting the study of writing processes with the texts that those processes bring forth" (Brumfee, 1986, p. 124). Part of talking the loneliness out of writing is recognizing that all composing strategies are, in relevant ways, socially based. In other words, writing depends on talk as a means for planning all the way through to revising. Just as in speaking we try, and sometimes succeed, in conveying our intentions to others, thereby overcoming the isolation of egocentric talk, so it is in writing that we use talk as a vehicle for clarifying our intentions to others. When we succeed in both endeavours there is a fundamental sense in which we achieve completion.

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